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ABSTRACT

Social change on behalf of the disadvantaged in a neighborhood or community can be achieved through various types of change agents, models, and approaches. One of the most effective models was developed by Saul Alinsky, a well-known American community organizer, and it was this model that provided the theoretical framework for the development of the Fresno Organizing Project (FOP) in 1982. The Project is an alliance of many labor, church, and community groups, formed to help the disadvantaged in Fresno, particularly in the areas of housing and schools. The purpose of the organization is to effect change through specific strategies and goals, to assist community members to take action on their own behalf, and to perpetuate the organization as a viable organizing tool. Technical development and leadership training was provided by the Organize Training Center (OTC) in San Francisco as FOP began to develop. Since then, significant gains have been recorded by the organization in terms of community services, political action on behalf of minorities and the peace movement, and funding. A strong membership base has been developed, and leadership training is ongoing. Evaluations of the organizations' activities are conducted both formally and informally, and indicate that FOP's adherence to the Alinsky-type model is quite close. (CJM)

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PLANNED SOCIAL CHANGE: THE CASE OF THE FRESNO ORGANIZING PROJECT

Theoretical Context

Change agents and their organizations have been classified in a variety of ways by contemporary theorists. Crowfoot and Chesler have provided one of the more useful schemes, contrasting the professional/technical approach with the political approach in terms of assumptions, agents, strategies, and objectives.[1] More recently, Herb White broadens the classification system to contrast the social work approach with the international development approach, distinguishing both from political activists and from those he labels "authentic" community organizations.

The hallmark of the authentic organization, according to White, is its empowerment of the constituency - people are enabled to act in their own interest because of their experience with the organization. It benefits its constituency, and draws its energy from the life force of the people - their will to survive with dignity.[2]

Within the political classification, still further refinements are made possible by considering, among other factors, the base of alliance of the organization and the strategies it employs to produce change. When the base of alliance is residential and economic, such change-oriented groups as Neighborhood Development Organizations may arise. When the base of alliance is primarily racial or ethnic, a more geographically widespread interest group such as APAAC (Asian Pacific American Advocates of California) may develop. Within the constraints imposed by membership restrictions, either type of association may foster conditions under which change

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beneficial to its constituency takes place.

Where the emphasis is placed on strategy rather than on membership criteria, quite different forms of organizations advocating planned social change emerge. Cloward and Piven[3] detail the protest model designed to promote the membership's legal and moral interests, as typified in the New York City Welfare Rights Movement of the late 1960's. Perhaps the best known variant of the organization emphasizing strategy is that of Alinsky (1909-1972), who developed a constituency-building model which incorporated certain aspects of the organizations based on membership criteria as well.

The Alinsky Model

Saul Alinsky was an American community organizer who identified himself as a radical. While it can be argued that his goals, which were built around church and family values[4], were essentially conservative, the action groups he engendered utilized abrasive tactics and high levels of emotional involvement so consistently as to identify their movements as radical. The characteristics of Alinsky-style organization include the use of conflict-ridden military language, emotional commitment to the organization on the part of the members, a reliance on tactics of intense personal pressure, involvement of large number of people, an appeal to the self-interest of group members, a territorial cast to the concerns raised, and a typical focus on schools and housing issues raised by the poor on their own behalf. In the years since Alinsky led a number of organizations in achieving social change through the implementation of these principles, other community organizers have adopted Alinsky-style methods to serve the cause of

the disadvantaged in their communities.

Training organizations have been founded and funded to train leaders to encourage the further development of these groups, beginning with the IAF, which Alinsky established in Chicago. In California, the Organize Training Center (OTC) in San Francisco has contracts with a number of local community groups throughout the state for leadership development and technical assistance. Mike Miller, the director of OTC, has listed several critical assumptions underlying community organizations, which illustrate the Alinsky heritage of OTC.[5] Fundamental is the emphasis on enabling alienated people to overcome the importance of their exclusion from participating in decisions that shape their lives. The organization is dedicated to their winning issues - taking back power over their life circumstances, in ways consistent with democratic and Judeo-Christian tradition.

The Fresno Situation

Fresno, California, is a city containing the elements of alienation and power abuse which set the stage for the development of an Alinsky-type organization. Fresno dominates the San Joaquin Valley, the agricultural heartland of California. Metropolitan Fresno, set in the richest agricultural county in the country, has a population of nearly 400,000. The city is roughly triangular in shape, with the older. southern portion of the city serving as home to approximately 100,000 people. This area, largely built before 1945, is multi-ethnic, with a distribution of 47% European (mostly elderly), 38% Hispanic, 10% Black, and 5% Asian, Native American, or other.

Twenty to sixty percent of the people in each census tract live below poverty guidelines in older Fresno. Housing is not only scarce in this area, but woefully inadequate, with 97% of the city's substandard housing located here.

The economic resources of the Fresno Community are controlled by a "double barreled" power structure. Agribusiness which includes huge corporate land holdings and processing plants, seeks to maintain surplus unskilled labor in the area. Banking and land development interests have used public resources and private capital over the past thirty years to build to the north of older Fresno. Extensive investment of this nature has resulted in disinvestment in older Fresno, creating an inner city with all its attendant social problems.

While older Fresno is the primary target for community organizing, the neighboring middle income areas are a concern as well. The political and economic power structures of the city have successfully exploited ethnic isolation, distrust, and antagonism among these low and middle income people. Historically, no vehicle has existed which was effective in overcoming the suspicion and racial prejudices of these groups. Residents of these areas have had a history of presenting their concerns to the power structure from isolated, ineffective positions. The need and potential have existed in Fresno for the establishment of a community organization which reaches across ethnic and socioeconomic lines to challenge the power structure with a united front.

The Fresno Organizing Project

In the Fall of 1980, Fresno Metro Ministry, an ecumenical inner-city agency, gathered 36 people representing labor, churches, and community groups to consider creating a multi-ethnic multi-issue, action-oriented organization. Recognizing the need, seven groups by early 1981 had formed a pre-sponsor committee, paid at least the minimum $400 joining fee, elected representative co-chairs, successfully applied for seed grants, and began to recruit new groups. OTC was contracted for consultant services, and in October of 1982, a Founding Convention was held which adopted a challenging set of goals and purposes. The organizing phase of the Fresno Organizing Project began with the hiring of a Director/ Lead Organizer in January, 1983.

Goals and Purposes

In many respects, the Fresno Organizing Project (FOP) fits the Alinsky model. Its goals and purposes reflect the concern that alienated people be empowered to participate in the making of decisions that affect their lives. The primary deviation of FOP from the Alinsky model is in its more broadly defined territory of interest with the entire older downtown area defined as the target as opposed to the traditional neighborhood focus. The goals adopted in 1982 are indicative of this breadth of concern:

a. The organization, by assisting people to take action on their own behalf, will hold local social and economic institutions accountable to low and moderate income residents of Fresno.

b. Membership representation from all the major low and middle income groups will be sought, as well as from special categories of low income groups, such as tenants, seniors, and the handicapped.

c. Membership will be drawn from a city-wide base, with special focus on the low and moderate income neighborhoods of Fresno

d. Decision-making and implementation within the organization will be conducted in such a way as to guarantee equal participation of low-income people.

e. The organization will, from the outset, adopt strategies designed to foster its permanence, including leadership development, local fund-raising, and in-depth involvement of permanent, voluntary organizations such as churches and labor unions.

Accomplishments

The history of the Fresno Organizing Project subsequent to the adoption of these early goals has been one of steady progress toward their accomplishment. Delegates of member organizations have been trained to interview their respective groups in order to surface issues of concern. The Organizing Project has provided technical assistance and a mechanism whereby these concerns can be addressed, brought to the attention of the power structure as issues of significance, and resolved for the betterment of the community. Even in its formative years, the Project has had considerable success in identifying such issues and in moving toward their resolution. The following examples illustrate not only the range of these concerns, but the strength of the Project's focus on empowering low and moderate income people to succeed in their confrontations with power.

Accomplishments in the Community

1. Valley Medical Center The most significant FOP victory to date has been convincing the Fresno County Board of Supervisors to maintain control of the Valley Medical Center, Fresno's regional

hospital for low income and indigent persons. In May of 1983 pastors and lay leaders from FOP member churches organized the Interfaith Task Force for VMC to oppose the County's selling the hospital to a private group which by contract would result in the immediate denial of medical attention to some indigent persons. After six months of research and the holding of public meetings in supervisorial districts, the Task Force prevailed upon the County Auditor and County Administrative Officer to provide the complete financial picture on VMC. The report given at a formal hearing in November showed, to the surprise of the Board, that, far from costing the County money, VMC is a money-maker. The Supervisors are now seeking to improve VMC services and income under continuing County ownership, guaranteeing ongoing medical care for the poor.

2. Hmong Children's Play Areas Member church Wesley Methodist, in conducting the FOP interviews of its members, identified a serious lack of open space for use of Hmong children in the immediate neighborhood of the church. The children were using the church, including its roof, for a playground, endangering their health and safety. Investigation revealed that the owners of the neighboring apartment complex had removed their playgrounds. Wesley's action plan calls for meeting with ownership to restore these needed play areas, together with representatives of the Hmong area residents.

3. Peace Education The FOP member Unitarian Church's interviewing process revealed peace issues to be the major concern of its constituency. The entire congregation met to determine an action plan to raise the issue before the Fresno community. It was decided to conduct a campaign with the theme, "Peace breaks out in Fresno",

including a Peace Week, a school conference, and an educational program on peace. A major accomplishment of the group has been to establish a network of all peace-focus groups in Fresno. The group plans to hold a major rally in the Spring, which will highlight local efforts while not neglecting the national importance of this issue. Specific plans are targeted at low and moderate income involvement in this peace initiative.

4. Block Grant Funds Through FOP involvement, member groups AFSCME and the Senior/Handicapped Coalition have held several neighborhood meetings and have attended City Council meetings asking that Community Development Block Grant funds be used to directly meet Federal guidelines which are: to benefit low and moderate income people, eliminate blight and slums, and to meet urgent neighborhood needs. After the city rejected their proposal, the two FOP member groups filed a complaint with the HUD area office in San Francisco on the proposed use of the funds in fiscal 1983-84. FOP is now awaiting HUD's response to this petition. Meanwhile, the two groups, with the support of other FOP member groups held a Town Meeting in West Fresno, one of our most blighted neighborhoods, with Congressman Lehman.

5. St. Alphonsus 75th Anniversary Celebration FOP assisted the delegates from St. Alphonsus in developing a plan for recognition of the different ethnic groups in the parish during the two-month-long celebration of the church's 75th anniversary. The recognition of specific groups each Sunday during September and October culminated in a multi-ethnic, multi-generation celebration involving 500-plus parishioners, the Bishop, and the Mayor. The city and the county both proclaimed October 30 as St. Alphonsus Sunday. FOP provided

technical assistance to the delegates in celebrating multi-ethnic contributions to this inner-city community.

Accomplishments in Building the Organization

In addition to these strides toward the resolution of specific issues in the community, FOP has accomplished a great deal in building the organization from within. To ensure success in confronting and winning issues, the membership must be recruited, trained, organized, led, and informed. Within a very brief period, the following gains in these areas have been made.

1. Building a Multi-ethnic Membership Base Since the idea for a multi-ethnic coalition took root, over 70 group briefings have been held, reaching some 560 individuals from nearly 100 churches and organizations. In addition, over 160 individual interview/visits have been made to pastors, union leaders and community leaders. As a result, 19 organizations are presently members of the Project. Of the currently joined groups, 4 are labor unions, 3 are community-based organizations, and the remaining 12 are churches. Seven of the member groups are predominantly Black and/or Hispanic, and 12 are predominantly Anglo, or mixed. Even as it grows, the Fresno Organizing Project is already the largest multi-ethnic coalition of churches, labor organizations, and community groups ever to work together in the history of Fresno.

2. Training Workshops The Sponsor Committee has been contracting with the Organize Training Center (OTC) of San Francisco for on-site training of leadership developed within member organizations. In addition to the one and two day workshops provided to delegates in Fresno, 10 slots per year are allotted to the Project for leaders

to attend 5-day workshops conducted by OTC in San Francisco. The Community Development Monitoring Group will provide leadership training and staff assistance on the Community Development Block Grant issue. By December 1984, the Project will have provided leadership training to at least 300 potential leaders drawn from all member groups. These selections are not random, but rather respond to the need to develop leadership among low and moderate income membership.

3. Interviewing-Revitalization Early in their involvement with FOP, delegates of member groups are trained in interviewing their constituencies to surface concerns, strengthen linkages, and develop action plans for resolution of identified issues. Typically, interview teams include the FOP delegation in addition to others, and they structure the interview process with the approval of the leadership of their organization. St. Alphonsus, Sierra Vista United Methodist, Fresno Metropolitan Ministry, and College Community Congregational are working to involve the entire congregation in feedback sessions to discuss issues and actions suggested by their recently completed interviewing. Other member groups, including Wesley UMC, the Unitarian Church, AFSCME, and the Senior/Handicapped coalition, have moved beyond the feedback stage to involvement in issues raised in their own interviewing process. In addition to focusing on critical issues for the membership, this process also serves to revitalize the member organizations by enhancing meaningful dialogue and expressions of concern among the constituency, reminding individuals and the groups alike of the values around which they gather. Sponsor committee meetings provide a forum for intergroup exchange and sharing of issues and planned actions, leading to the

fluid formation of alliances around common concerns.

4. Movement Toward Self-Sufficiency The Project is moving towards its adopted goal of substantial self-sufficiency by 1986. The annual budget is in the $90,000 - $110,000 range, with an increasing proportion to be raised by local funding efforts. Member organizations' dues range from $300 - $700 based on size. Grass-roots fundraising plans designed to supplement dues include a program/ad book for the annual convention, a drawing to increase visibility and widen participation, a fall event and a pledge drive. In 1984, the balance of funding (70%) is to be raised through proposals submitted to national church and foundation sources. Proposal committee volunteers are assisted by FOP staff in identifying appropriate sources from which to seek funding.

The Project is determined to maintain the present "organization of organizations" format as it moves toward greater self-sufficiency. The labor efficiency of this model allows for limited staffing, and for access to large numbers in member group populations. Large-scale participation in grass-roots fundraisers will be made possible through involvement at all levels of this structure. Plans call for an approach to be made to local, private sector institutions for a portion of the local support dollars needed.

Evaluation

At the local level, evaluation occurs within the Project as both a formal and an informal activity. All committee meetings end with an evaluative discussion which covers what was done well, what improvements could be made, and whether each committee member feels heard. Formal evaluation occurs through quarterly review of planning

goals, culminating in progress reports circulated throughout the membership and to funding sources. Annual in-depth evaluations are guided by the broader goals of the Project; the development of indigenous leadership, the winning of specific issues, and the enhancement of coalition-building among member organizations.

These overarching goals reflect the fundamental purpose of the Project; to enhance the quality of life through the concerted efforts of member organizations representative of low and moderate income Fresno residents. The democratic structure of FOP, the level of delegate involvement in the committee system, and the flexibility of FOP in coalescing around issues as they are surfaced by member group all contribute to the stimulation of "concerted effort" by member groups. Success in the Valley Medical Center confrontation, together with a series of smaller "wins" on local issues has lent credibility to the ability of FOP to meet its goal of effecting the quality of life in Fresno. As the organization enters its first "official" year of existence, with incorporation and a city-wide convention scheduled, the criteria of member involvement and success on issues will be continued points of evaluation.

One step removed from the local level, evaluation criteria can be derived from the description of successful community organizing found in the writings of FOP's consultant at OTC, Mike Miller. The most significant criteria listed by Miller are that of local leadership, self-funding, and actions on issues.[5] The list is expanded elsewhere to include the consideration of value-based criteria as well as those of political and financial progress.

For example, here Miller indicates that organizations should, after 3-5 years, have "developed among the people an appreciation and understanding of the values and procedures of democracy", and "have expanded the horizons of local leaders so that they see the interrelationship of issues".[6] While still in the early stages of development, FOP has explicitly addressed addressed these criteria, having moved closer to financial self-sufficiency each year, fostered communication among member organizations around issues of common concern, and sponsored values workshops for leaders and delegates to explore the foundations of personal and group commitment to the Project.

Finally, at the most abstract level, FOP can be evaluated for its theoretical fit - its adherence to the model for Alinskly-style organizations. In reviewing the characteristics of such groups, on only one does FOP fall far short of compliance. At this point in time, the issues raised by FOP have not focused on schools and housing for the poor, with the exception of the concern of use of CDBG monies for inner-city rehabilitation. Over time, it is entirely possible that these issues will emerge as paramount concerns of the membership, but that has not been the case to date. Moderate adherance to the indicators of emotional commitment, use of military language, and utilization of intense pressure can be noted. Commitment levels may be measured by attendance at meetings, which has been quite consistently good, and by level of effort on committee work, which has been somewhat variable across the membership. On specific issues, conflict-ridden military language is employed, in discussions of "alliances", and "winning", but on other issues the tone is more moderate and conciliatory. On only the VMC issue

was intense pressure on the power structure utilized and sustained over a period of months. That action is the single most visible and successful to date, and may serve as the leading indicator of the future style of FOP.

Full adherance to Alinsky criteria is shown by FOP on the final three measures: involvement of large numbers of people, an appeal to the self-interest of group members, and a territorial cast to the concerns raised. Older Fresno and the surrounding area is quite clearly the target of FOP concern, and the commitment to the improvement of living conditions there is made on the basis of democratic and moral values important to the membership. Intentional examination of these values is an explicit part of the joining process, and continues to energize the surfacing of issues through interviewing and revitalization in member groups. The structure of creating an organization of organizations acting in their own self interest for the betterment of the quality of life reflects a strategy designed to maximize the number of participants. Delegates can "turn out" their home constituencies on behalf of FOP issues, and will be doing just that in an even more visible way in the years to come.

On the local, intermediate, and theoretical levels, then, FOP can be viewed as an organization-in-progress, meeting the essential criteria for its type. When the official incorporation and city-wide convention takes place, it can be expected to be in a position to capitalize on the work done prior to that point. For the first time in the history of Fresno, an effective coalition of churches, labor unions, and community organizations exists with which to

challenge the economic and social structure to accountability on behalf of the poor and moderate-income people of the community. If progress toward self sufficiency continues, and if the momentum for winning issues can be sustained, FOP will be a community organization worth of emulation and replication in cities across the nation.

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